

EURYDICE
OR
THE NATURE OF OPERA

TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW

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of the Book*

EURYDICE
OR
THE NATURE OF OPERA

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OR

THE NATURE OF OPERA

I

OF all musical forms, the combination of music and drama which we call opera has probably been the most abused and the least understood. By nature it is open to attack from two sides. Men of letters, if they are not musical, do not venture to criticize an art foreign to their own so long as it keeps to its own ground ; but they have not felt themselves invalidated by their lack of musical sensibility from expressing an opinion when it has, as they think, encroached upon their own province by co-operation with poetry or drama. On the other side, there are

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purists among the musicians, who regard any contact between music and anything external to it as a defilement of their art, just as certain critics of painting will not allow any place to "illustration" in a picture.

The extremists on both sides are not without their good reasons. There are poems to which music can certainly add nothing and from which it may, however good in itself, detract some essential quality. For the "music" is already in the words, and any addition to them merely disturbs the balance carefully adjusted by the poet. A gilded lily pleases nobody. This is especially true of the English language, which is so rich in overtones, and of the English temperament, which has always inclined to a romantic expression that is, by contrast, for example, with the logical formality of French, peculiarly unsuited by nature to be a partner to the most formal of the arts. This fact

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is the main explanation of our poverty in musical genius as compared with our extraordinary wealth of fine literature.

On the other side, just as the literal transcription upon canvas of a pathetic incident or a pretty scene does not make a work of art, so the imitation in music of material facts, which are external to it, is indefensible on æsthetic grounds. If, however, those incidents, scenes, or facts, instead of being imitated slavishly are translated by the imagination into terms of music or painting, the act of artistic creation has taken place. The value of the resulting work depends upon the intensity of the artist's imagination and the degree of his technical ability to express his meaning so that it shall be clearly understood.

The charge brought against opera, as a form, is that it is a hybrid, a mixture of oil and vinegar, a spoiling of two good things. We are told that it cannot be

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a satisfying art-form, in the sense that painting or poetry may be, because each of its elements must make concessions to the other. The swiftness of the drama is impeded by the slowness of music, which takes time to deploy its forces; while music has difficulty in carrying forward the dramatic action without itself becoming dull. There is a continual struggle between the drama, which requires freedom for its development, and the music, which seeks to impose upon its partner the bonds of its own formality. It follows that the composer of opera is peculiarly liable to write music which is merely illustrative and formless, while the librettist may fall into the opposite snare of producing a stiffly symmetrical play, whose characters are lifeless abstractions rather than living men and women.

The case against opera is, indeed, a strong one. Yet it amounts to little more than that opera has certain

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limitations, which both composer and poet must recognize. In this it differs in no way from the other arts. There are certain things you cannot do in painting. You may successfully represent the recession of a scene away from the spectator, but you cannot show him what is on the other side of a hill without doing so much violence to natural forms, that your representation will fail to convince him. So we may ask the objector to opera : What if opera is not a mere mixture of two substances which remain separate and distinguishable, but is, to use the chemical term, a compound of them, unique in itself and distinct from its two elements ? What if it is an art-form subject only to its own laws, which are not the same laws that govern either music or drama, even as sculpture is distinguished from the graphic art and drama itself from other forms of literature ? The laws or conventions of an art are dictated by the

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nature of its medium, as the flat surface covered with pigment, the modelled forms of clay or marble, the printed page for reading, or the acted scene and spoken word.

How little this is understood may be exemplified by one of the most frequent (and most absurd) objections to opera, which is also a very difficult one to combat, since it springs from a lack of imagination. Opera is said to be unnatural because in it the characters sing, which (the argument proceeds) is not the normal mode of communication between men and women. It is, of course, true that in our daily lives, even at moments of deep emotion, we do not burst into song; nor, when we intend to leave the room, do we announce the fact a dozen times at different levels in the scale with the assistance of such company as may happen to be present. On the contrary, at times of emotional stress we are more than usually in-

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articulate, meeting the occasion with a banal phrase, a mere exclamation of joy or of pain, or by "breaking down"—all according to the force of the emotion and our several temperaments. But, if we do not sing, neither do we spout blank verse—nor, for that matter, did the Elizabethans; and yet most of us find no difficulty in accepting the convention whereby Hamlet cries out: "O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt!" although what we should probably say (or merely think to ourselves) would be: "I wish I were dead!"¹

It is a strange thing that the English people, who have produced a Shakespeare and a Congreve, and who have

¹ Even if we turn from the high poetic vein to the modern naturalistic drama, we shall find that the realism of the dialogue is for the most part only apparent, and that it is based upon artificial conventions, which differ only in kind and in degree from those of the Shakespearean drama.

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not failed to delight in the poetry of the one and the highly artificial prose of the other—neither of them bearing any very close relation to the actual speech of everyday life—should yet be unable to take the short step further, which is necessary for the acceptance of the operatic convention. For the operatic composer does with his music only what the dramatist does with his poetry: he gives full expression to those emotions which in life reduce us to speechlessness, and puts a fine edge upon the normally blunt weapons of conversation.

If, then, opera is to be condemned on grounds of artificiality, that condemnation must lie also, in a greater or a less degree, against all other forms of art. Let us admit freely that opera is more artificial than the drama, since it takes us one step further from the ordinary world of commonplace speech. That is both its opportunity, since it can raise us to a higher plane of emotional

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experience, and its danger, since it slips the more easily into absurdity. The familiar conversation about whisky between Pinkerton and Sharpless in *Madam Butterfly* is ridiculous, not because it is operatic, but because it is not operatic. It is not the kind of thing which lends itself to artificial treatment, and its intrusion brings us down with a bump from the ideal world of opera into the real world, where men in clubs or bars say: "Have another?"¹ The composer has fallen into a bathos, which is the pitfall of the serious artist, even as it is one of the best traps to catch laughter in the equipment of the parodist. But this instance of failure, like many others that are frequently cited, is not a proof of the absurdity of the operatic convention. It merely proves that the

¹ The incident is probably more ridiculous to Englishmen than to Italians, to whom whisky is an unnatural and exotic form of refreshment.

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operatic composer must not transgress the limitations which circumscribe the form he is using. The same incident, it must be remembered, might be just as ridiculous in a spoken drama.

The word *artificial* has unhappily shared the fate of so much else in our language, and, losing its true significance, has become a loose synonym for *sham*. "Artificial flowers" suggests those china monstrosities beneath glass domes with which the bereaved attempt to cheat the evanescence of their own nature, which is as the flower of the field. But there are nowadays skilful artificers who make flowers of glass or shells or feathers, and it is to be observed that those which are most beautiful are not the ones that most nearly resemble the flowers we grow in our gardens, but the ones that are the original creations of the maker and accept the fact of their artificiality, instead of attempting to disguise it. In

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the world of artistic creation, it is, as Verdi said, much better to invent truth than to imitate it.

Let us accept then, the artificiality of opera not as a disadvantage but as a positive quality, which delimits the scope of the composer's activities. Now the limitations of an art are not really its drawbacks. On the contrary, they provide a very necessary discipline. When the cinematograph was invented, the writers of scenarios, suddenly confronted with an entirely new medium for which no special technique as yet existed, adopted the technique of the spoken drama. But, as they were absolved from the necessity of showing their characters in one place for a whole act or, at all events, a whole scene—a necessity which is called the “unity of space”—and could jump their audience from China to Peru and back in less time than it takes you to read this sentence, they produced a com-

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pletely shapeless form of drama, which had to be explained by the frequent projection of captions upon the screen. The film-dramatists are only now by slow degrees evolving a technique adapted to the limitations of their medium.

Just as the film-play laboured under the disadvantage of an attempt to use the technique of the spoken drama, opera has been handicapped by the fact that it combines two forms of art, which had already been developed independently. Even if both music and drama were in a comparatively primitive and fluid state when the first operas were written, each grew to maturity far more steadily than opera has done. We shall have to consider later why operatic development has proceeded by fits and starts. For the present it is enough to state this disadvantage, which carries with it another that is perhaps the root of the general

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misunderstanding of the form. For the playgoer probably goes to the opera-house expecting to witness a dramatic performance similar to that which he is accustomed to see in the theatre, while the musician goes in the frame of mind in which he attends a concert.¹ There are, too, those who go in no frame of mind at all, but only in their smartest clothes. They need hardly be considered.

¹ Since this was written, a young musician of great promise has admitted to me that, once he has seen an opera, he is quite content to sit at subsequent performances out of sight of the stage and listen to the music. Indeed, I gather that he prefers to do this. His interest is purely musical, and, though he may have the memory and the imagination to re-create for himself the action and scene, I cannot help feeling that he, like all who listen to opera "on the wireless," misses something essential. Yet he is himself engaged upon the composition of an opera.

II

IF we survey the history of opera, it will be observed that two main influences have dominated its development from the beginning until the present day. The first was mainly emotional and came from Italy ; the second was more intellectual and of German origin. This division may be made for the sake of convenience, and must not be pressed too far. For we are faced at the outset with the fact that as early as 1594—that is to say in the very year of the performance of Peri's *Dafne*—Orazio Vecchi propounded in his introduction to *L'Amfiparnasso, commedia armonica*, some of the very ideas which have been considered by every operatic theorist down to the present day. He says of his work :

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“ Its moral intention will be less than that of simple comedy, for music applies itself to the passions rather than to the reason, and hence I have been compelled to use reflective elements with moderation. Moreover, the action has less scope for development, spoken words being more rapid than song¹; so it is expedient to condense, to restrict, to suppress details, and to take only the capital situations. The imagination ought to supply the rest.” Had he said “ the music ” in place of “ the imagination,” Vecchi would have stated with precision the central requirement of operatic theory. But,

¹ It is interesting to compare with this statement the words of a very modern critic, Mr. Roger Fry, who writes in the *Nation and Athenæum* of 28th February, 1925 : “ In the high pitch of dramatic tensivity which Wagner’s themes implied, the tempo of passionate speech seemed to me to be altogether at variance with any possible tempo of the analogous musical development.”

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although Vecchi applied the keen intelligence of a Renaissance Italian to the problem of combining drama with music, it will be observed that he assumes that the result will appeal to the emotions rather than to the intellect, if again one may make a rough and ready distinction.

This is not the place for a full examination of the origins of Italian opera. It is well, however, to rebut the superficial assumption of some historians and many amateurs that opera was invented as an entirely new form by a group of young Florentine nobles, who were dilettanti musicians and who wished to revive the splendours of Greek tragedy. The facts are not so simple as that ; and, if they were, we should be faced with the unparalleled phenomenon of an art-form being created and brought within speaking distance of perfection in a space of fifteen years. For Monteverde's *Orfeo*

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was produced at Mantua in 1607. But the existence of Vecchi's madrigal-dramas, to say nothing of his very clear vision of the problems which the combination of music and drama present, shows that the tendency towards opera was of much longer standing. That tendency can be traced back to the century before. For about 1472 there was produced, also at Mantua, a lyric drama by Angelo Poliziano called *Favola di Orfeo*. It is not without significance that this, the true ancestor of opera, should have been based upon the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, which was later to inspire operatic composers down to the days of Gluck. Nor is it unnatural that such a story should give rise to the idea of combining music with drama, since music is inherent in it. No more need be said of the *Favola di Orfeo* than that it has greater affinities with the bucolic dialogues of Virgil, who was then the fashionable

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poet, than with the Greek drama, which had not yet been fully discovered.¹

The century which intervened between Poliziano's lyric drama and the activities of Peri and Caccini contains nothing in the way of operatic work except the madrigal-dramas, of which Vecchi's *L'Amfiparnasso* is an example. In this the music is written in five parts; the two upper parts represented one side of the dialogue and the two lowest took the other side, while the middle voice threw its weight into whichever part was at the moment most important. There was no attempt to make the music dramatic in the modern sense, and these madrigal-dramas were nearly always burlesques.²

¹ Those who wish for an account of the work will find one in W. J. Henderson's *Forerunners of Italian Opera*. The poem has been translated by Symonds and is printed in his *Sketches and Studies of Italy*, pp. 217-24. The music is lost.

² For further information see Romain Rolland's *Histoire de l'Opéra en Europe avant*

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Their importance in operatic history is that they are the ancestors of the typically Italian *opera buffa*, of which *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* is the example best-known in England.

The Florentine innovators had behind them a long tradition of dramatic performances with music, and, as we have seen, the problems of combining the two arts had been faced by those against whose methods of composition they reacted. For the direction taken by Peri and Caccini was not towards a development of the madrigal-drama; they were wholly opposed to the polyphonic style. But we can no more explain Peri's *Dafne* without the madrigal-drama than we can explain *Pelléas et Mélisande* without *Tristan*.

There was another element in existing

Lulli et Scarlatti, and W. J. Henderson's *Forerunners of Italian Opera*, which quotes examples of the music. Examples will also be found in Vol. III of the *Oxford History of Music*.

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musical conditions, which drove the Florentines to revolt and which has a more important bearing on our problem. Although at this time no music for solo voice had been written—a fact which it is difficult for us to grasp—the singers of the day had developed their technique to a very high standard and exhibited it by singing one part of a madrigal with florid decorations, while other parts were played upon instruments by themselves or other musicians. The solos of Poliziano's *Orfeo* must have been of this nature. One of the most notable characteristics, and the chief danger, of Italian opera, was, therefore, in existence before opera itself. The Florentine innovators were disgusted by the meretriciousness of these displays, which are comparable in the music of our day only with the *cadenzas* in an instrumental concerto, just as Gluck revolted against the vanity of the Italian singers in Paris and Wagner

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against the feeble tunefulness which Donizetti eked out with vocal pyrotechnics. It must not be forgotten that the performances of good singers who happened also to be good artists were probably very beautiful, even as was Joachim's *cadenza* in 'Brahms' violin concerto. However, the rule held good of the majority of singers then as now, that they must be held innocent of intelligence until proved guilty.

But, although Peri and Caccini raised up for themselves an austere ideal of setting the words of the drama to music so that the meaning should be made clear and be emphasized by the vocal line, they did not conform wholly to this ideal in practice. The native tendency of the Italian to let himself go in a rush of vocalization was too much for them. But, in contradistinction to the improvizers, Caccini wrote down what was to be sung and he uses his embellishments as a rule with discretion

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and sometimes with the greatest aptness. Unfortunately, the successors of the pioneers did not maintain the same level of artistic conscience, so that two centuries later we find Rossini, disgusted with the bad taste of improvising singers, writing out the exact notes he wanted them to sing !

This tendency to embellish their melodies and the fact that Italian opera is, above all things, melodic, show that the most important thing in music to the Italian is the human voice. So long as that is present in fine quality, he will put up with any amount of absurdity in the words or triviality in the music. Without this fact, the existence of such works as *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Lucrezia Borgia* in an intelligent and civilized era would be simply inexplicable. The Italian evidently seizes upon the emotional pleasure of the moment and so long as his ears are tickled by a fine voice and a good tune,

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he is satisfied. But it is not thus that works of lasting merit are created and we get the result that all the great Italian operas, which were written before the nineteenth century and which have survived on the stage, were composed by Germans and Austrians, by Handel,¹ Gluck and Mozart. Monteverde is a possible exception, though his *Orfeo* can hardly be said to keep the stage. Alessandro Scarlatti is far more important as a link in the development of the symphonic form than as a composer of operas. The only one of his dramatic works which could be staged to-day with any hope of success is the little comedy, *Il Trionfo dell' Onore*, which might take its place beside Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*.

This strange result needs some

¹ Handel's *Giulio Cesare* and *Rodelinda* have lately been revived in Germany, where they have had a genuine success and not merely the *réclame* of historical interest.

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explanation. For we cannot just dismiss it with the statement that Handel, Gluck and Mozart were better composers than Buononcini, Piccini and Cimarosa. That explains nothing. Nor can we hope to probe the secrets of Nature and tabulate the apparently capricious laws which govern the production of genius. But may we not find a partial explanation in the view of music taken by the German, just as the Italian's view explains the virtues and vices of his opera? Whereas the instinct of the Italian is to sing, the German turns to instrumental music when he wishes to express himself. The difference in temperament may be attributed, at least in part, to the difference of language. Italian is a quickly-moving language and very simple in its sounds, both vowels and consonants. German is heavy, slow and complex. This is not to repeat the old fallacy about German being

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“unsingable,” but there was this much truth in the attitude taken up by the opponents of German that it was certainly not singable after the methods and to the music of the Italians. You cannot sing German or English “in Italian,” and one of the great stumbling-blocks to performances of foreign operas in English is that they are not (and often cannot be) sung in our language, although the actual words are those of our mother-tongue. I mean that the singers have to pervert their pronunciation in order to do justice to the melody, so that the language ceases to be intelligible as English.

Given a composer belonging to a nationality which thinks in terms of instrumental music, yet employing the musical idiom and the language of a nation which is given to singing, you have in the result an approximation to the golden mean. Further, it must be remembered that Gluck and Mozart,

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besides having had experience in Italy, were Austrians, and that the culture of Vienna in the eighteenth century was far more akin to the Italian than to North German. I think it will be conceded, even by our modern Samuel Butlers, that as a composer of operas, Handel is inferior to both Gluck and Mozart, and his inferiority is certainly not attributable, at least so far as Gluck is concerned, to his being a lesser musician. May it not be due to the fact that his essentially Teutonic temperament was out of key with the medium of Italian opera? The only thing which enabled him to achieve so great and, in the light of facts, so astonishing a success in this alien medium, was his power of assimilating the qualities of other people without becoming a slave to them, a power which he shared with the other great Germanic composers of his century—Bach, Gluck, Haydn and Mozart. But

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neither Handel nor Bach, both thorough Teutons, assimilated the Italian style as completely as did their Austrian successors. "Handel," says Mr. Dent,¹ "set Italian as he set English, like a foreigner, never approaching that delicate intimacy of declamation which is as characteristic a quality of Scarlatti as of Purcell." And it must be remembered that a literary appreciation of this sort may take effect not only in impassioned recitative, but also in the most melodious and florid of arias. Handel's *coloratura* is fairly effective in many cases, but it is commonplace in detail; a florid passage by Handel is as different from one by Scarlatti as a *cadenza* of Liszt is from a *cadenza* of Chopin.

Nevertheless, as musical works, Handel's operas are superior to those of

¹ *Alessandro Scarlatti, His Life and Works*, p. 201.

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Scarlatti. I think their superiority is due, at least in part, to the greater use he makes of the orchestra. We begin to see in him already the German tendency to set the instrumentalists on a level with the singers, which ended finally in the complete submersion of the latter, the abolition of the stage altogether and the enactment of the whole drama by the orchestra, as in the tone-poems of Richard Strauss. It would be difficult to find anything in contemporary opera by an Italian comparable with the lovely phrase which opens Jupiter's air in *Semele*, "Where'er you walk." I take that as an example because it is familiar. It would hardly be unfair to say that here the musical interest of the accompaniment is equal to that of the voice part. This tendency was developed by Gluck, who added to it the other German characteristic I have mentioned, the appeal to the intellect. For Gluck propounded once

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more the theories which Caccini had stated at the outset, and attempted to make the music entirely subservient to the words of the drama. In the Preface to *Alceste* he says :

“ I endeavoured to reduce music to its proper function, that of seconding poetry by enforcing the expression of the sentiment and the interest of the situations without interrupting the action or weakening it by superfluous ornament.”

In his practice, he sowed the seed which was to blossom in Weber and in Wagner. In the interval came Mozart, who also paid far more attention to the orchestra than the Italians, and achieved the most perfect balance between the singers and the accompaniment that has yet been heard. Mozart was, too, the first considerable composer to turn his attention to opera in German. But it can hardly be said that he developed in *Die Entführung* or

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Die Zauberflöte a distinctive and consistent German style, though the big bass airs in these two operas are as German as those of Leporello and Figaro (and, for that matter, Pedrillo)¹ are Italian. These operas are, indeed, German in their form, that of the *Singspiel*, rather than in their musical idiom. Papageno is Viennese in origin and his airs are songs rather than *arias*, but his place in the scheme is that of a *buffo* character in Italian opera.

It was not until the beginning of last century that, with the advent of the Romantic movement, German opera came fully into its own heritage. There had, as in the case of Italy, been a long period of preparation during which the form was working itself out in the hands

¹ The charming serenade of Pedrillo bears a clear resemblance to an air of Scarlatti's—a resemblance which is due more probably to Mozart's complete absorption of the Italian style than to a reminiscence of a particular melody.

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of minor composers who have long been forgotten. *Die Zauberflöte* was the first sign of something great, and it is in the nature of a "sport." Then when the time was ripe, there came Weber and that strange unbalanced work of genius *Fidelio*, the unhappy experiments of Schubert, and finally the crowning masterpieces of Richard Wagner. In his work we see the subordination of the drama to the music carried to the furthest extreme possible, so that one may say that the drama has become music. For, whatever Wagner may have said in his many treatises and with all respect to Mr. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, it is as musician and not as poet that Wagner retains and always will retain his hold upon mankind. He was great as a poet only in that he saw instinctively the kind of thing that he needed as a structure for his music and was able to provide it.

This very cursory account of the

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development of opera in Italy and in Germany supplies us with one or two lessons which we may apply to our own case. But we need not deduce from the fact that the best Italian operas were written by alien composers the result that the masterpieces of English opera will be written by the Chinese, or that our composers are likely to find their true medium in Choctaw. The predominance of Italian culture throughout Europe, which was due to the start obtained by that country when it went in for the revival of learning, accounts for the paradox, and there is no parallel for it at the present day. Two important things stand out. First, there has always been a long period of preparation before the musical genius of a nation has blossomed out. Many generations of Bachs flowed into that mighty river the Germans call "Joh. Seb." Secondly, as water finds its own level, a language finds its own best

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means of expression in music. It will have been observed, for instance, that Wagner's works, when sung in English, seem to drag ; and they are often taken at *tempi* much faster than the German conductors allow in order to compensate for this. An even more striking example is provided by an English-born composer, Delius, whose *Mass of Life* and *The Village of Romeo and Juliet* sound, as settings of words, intolerably tedious in English because they were written to German texts which will stand the strain of a slower pace.

The English language combines the possibilities of speed, which Italian has, with an extraordinary richness and variety both of vowels and consonants. The complexity of most of our vowel-sounds makes them unsuitable for sustaining, because the singer inevitably resolves the sound into its component parts, and we get a trisyllable instead of a triphthong. These sounds can be

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dodged by the skilful singer ; but they need the dodging, unlike the Italian vowels. Our consonants, too, are vastly more important in proportion to the vowels than in the Italian language, though less so than in German. But, even more important than the components of speech, is the manner of using it. It is often very difficult to recognize a single letter taken from a cursive script, which is yet perfectly legible when the whole word or sentence is seen. Englishmen may be said to talk in "cursive," while Italians, as those who went to the season of Piramdello's plays will recognize, speak in "copper-plate." Every syllable is given its full value.

These facts have been recognized by all English composers who have written vocal music of any value. It is the failure to recognize them that makes the vocal writing of Elgar and Delius so unsatisfactory, and a similar failure con-

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tributed to the barrenness of the period which followed the death of Purcell and persisted within living memory. The influence of Handel undoubtedly accentuated the failure of English music ; for composers went on trying to write *Largos* in English. But the influence was negative rather than positive in its effect. It could not have smothered genius, had genius existed ; but it did prevent the creation of the right atmosphere for the preparation, which, I have suggested, precedes the coming of genius.

This aspect of the matter seems to me by far the most useful for examination in connection with the subject under discussion. For it would be quite futile for a critic to suggest what kind of music will be written by the composer of the future. He can go no further than the statement of the capacities and limitations of the language or other *media* which the

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composer is to use, since he will have to work within those capacities and limitations. But, before passing on to the main point, it may be well to note one fact about English opera in the past. For there were the beginnings of a flourishing school of opera which culminated in Purcell. It originated in the provision of incidental music for plays in scenes dealing with religious ceremonies, supernatural persons or such things as triumphal processions. The Masques, of course, contributed their quota towards the development of the school, but these are not our concern for the moment. The significant fact is that all the English operas of that period retain these characteristics, especially the presence of the supernatural characters, witches, fairies and various apparitions. I may link up with this the fact that one of the most successful modern essays in English opera is Mr. Nicholas Gatty's *The*

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Tempest, a work which does carry on the tradition of Purcell without being an antiquarian imitation. This characteristic in our opera may be compared with the prevalence in Germany of the fairy-tale element, which is conspicuously absent from Italian works.

The preparation, of which I have spoken and in which it is possible for each of us to take some useful part, however small, consists in fostering the right atmosphere in which the composer of genius, when he comes, may flourish. For, as Mr. Ernest Newman has pointed out, the composer cannot possibly undertake the double labour of making his bricks and building his house. The material must be to his hand, and it must not be merely raw material. We can see in the short-lived ebullition of Russian national music during the nineteenth century the danger of trying to build without foundations or even

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plans. There were two men of undoubted genius among these Russians. Moussorgsky and Borodin. Yet their works are crude and shapeless, and take their place in the world's musical literature only by reason of the extraordinary power of individual scenes. It was not merely that these men were amateurs — Rimsky-Korsakov was learning his theory with his own pupils after his appointment to a professorship at the Petrograd Conservatoire—they had no tradition behind them which would guide them in the structure of their works. Russian culture was in its infancy and mainly of foreign origin. But the Nationalists, very rightly, revolted against alien influence and, partly because they were incapable of such complicated musical thought, wrongly despised the German symphonic form as mere mathematics. The result was that they produced music which was repetitive and formless.

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They had to hand any amount of valuable raw material in the form of folk-tunes, which they strung together anyhow. When inspiration failed, they repeated the tune in another key or on a different instrument, and they substituted brilliant external decoration for a sound core. Their music appealed to us at first by reason of its novelty and barbaric splendour, but how tired we became of it, once the unfamiliarity wore off! Theirs is the mistake into which so many modern painters have fallen, who lay on colour in default of form. As M. Rolland says: "*Les musiciens qui font la peinture prennent la lettre pour l'esprit et le matériel des sons pour leur âme cachée.*"

This warning is necessary, because there has been an easy assumption that we, too, who are rich in folk-song, may make of this raw material a national school of opera. But the danger is not so great as it was, nor was it ever so

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imminent here as in Russia, because we have behind us centuries of culture and a great tradition of music, though it was lost for two hundred years and its threads are only now being picked up. It is recognized that a folk-song is one thing and that an extended musical composition, whether it be a symphony or an opera, is another, and that you cannot create the latter by stringing a number of the former together. A composer like Vaughan Williams is not likely to fall into such an error, and he has shown how folk-song may be used as the basis of what we must call art-music. If we need confirmation for this reading of the signs, we may turn to Spain, also the possessor of a fine old culture, where de Falla is doing for his native music after his own fashion what Vaughan Williams is doing for England.

But we must go back a little and see how the "preparation" in England has taken place and how far it has got.

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The chief credit for the revival of an English School of music, as opposed to a school imitating foreign models, must be given to Stanford. Others, like Parry, Mackenzie and, in a rather different way, Elgar, have played a part in it. The last-named, though unlikely to have any direct influence on the future development of our music, has spoken as an Englishman of his period and, what is most important, gave us a good conceit of ourselves among the nations at a time when it was thought to be quite impossible that any of our race should be able to hold his own beside the composers of Germany. The influence of the others, especially of Stanford, has been more direct. Stanford, who trained most of our living composers, has made possible, by both his precept and his practice, a return to the really English style of declamation which had been lost to sight since the death of Purcell. Un-

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happily he was not endowed with the "sense of the theatre," which is essential for success in opera, or the creation of a vital school of British opera might not have been so long delayed. He was too concerned with niceties of workmanship, which do not "come off" in the theatre and often actually get in the way, and he was blind to some of the primary laws of dramatic art. For instance, in *Shamus O'Brien*, he cheats the audience into believing that the Banshee has called Shamus away, when in reality it is nothing but a practical joke played upon him by one of the characters. That is neither fair-play nor good drama. His songs, however, are a permanent addition to the treasury of English music, and he has done for serious vocal music the same service that Sullivan performed for the English comic opera, that of re-creating an intelligible and truly English style of singing. Unhappily,

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the example of Sullivan has not been successfully followed up, and we seem to have lost what might have been a germinating force in our national opera. We have already noticed that it was from the *Singspiel*, a corresponding form, that opera developed in Germany through Mozart and Weber to Wagner.

III

THE language in which an opera is written is, then, an important factor in determining the style of the music, giving it what we call national characteristics. There is another, no less important factor, which must be examined, and that is the period at which a work is composed. For the dramatic and musical styles of the day necessarily determine the operatic style. It is unthinkable that anybody could have composed a work like Gounod's *Faust* in the eighteenth century, because neither the dramatic idiom, such as it is, of Barbier and Carré, nor the musical idiom used by Gounod had been invented. The spirit of the opera is nineteenth century to the core, and French at that. No one but a French-

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man could have written the duet between Micaela and Don José in the first act of *Carmen*, with its sentimental references to the soldier's mother. It is perfectly sincere and the kind of thing may be found in almost any French novel of the period. A hundred years before, though Frenchmen may be supposed to have regarded their mothers with no less affection than the average Englishman does to-day, such a scene would have been as inconceivable to the Frenchman, as it is uncomfortable to the Englishman now whenever the opera is sung in English, because he does not express his filial love in that way.

All through history opera follows the contemporary developments in music and drama. We have already noted that Vecchi used the madrigal style in his *commedia armonica*, though whether *L'Amfiparnasso* was acted is doubtful. It seems more probable that it was sung like a dramatic oratorio. Monteverde

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adopted the forms of the madrigals and dances of his own day, when he composed his operas. The librettos of these operas were fashioned according to the canons, as far as they were understood, of the ancient Greek drama ; that is to say, they were thoroughly Italian and as thoroughly dated 1600. For a while during the succeeding centuries opera led the fashion in musical style, rather than followed it. For music meant, first and foremost, Italian music, even as in the nineteenth century it meant German music : and Italian music meant, first and foremost, opera. So the operatic *aria*, which had been developed into a variety of duly classified and characteristic forms until an opera degenerated into little more than a concert of elaborate vocal pieces, shared with the dance the provision of formative influences upon the orchestral symphony, which developed during the latter part of the eighteenth century.

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The development was carried a stage further by Beethoven, who enlarged the scope of the form by the use of thematic developments, of which Haydn and Mozart never dreamt. The leadership in music passed to Germany and operatic form became subservient to the German symphonic style. The characteristics of this style may be briefly summarized. In a symphony by Haydn or by Mozart you will find that the first movements consist of two melodies, distinct and alternating, heard in a succession of keys, which give variety and, by their relationship and recurrence, unity to the movement. The two melodies are, indeed, linked by episodic passages, but these have, as a rule, so little significance, that Wagner likened them to the clattering of plates between the courses of a banquet. The two melodies are never heard in combination, and they are usually deliberately contrasted, the one with the other.

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The dramatic and human elements, which Beethoven introduced into his music and whose presence makes us call it Romantic, necessitated a modification of the eighteenth century plan. A single idea permeates a whole movement or a whole work, and the musical expression of that idea in all its aspects consists of the development of a single theme and the derivation from it of kindred material. The new method enlarged the scope of the symphonic form immensely and freed it from the strict and symmetrical formality of the older symphonies. It was possible to do this without any sacrifice of form, because that was preserved and indeed enhanced by the unity of idea underlying the whole work. The contrast between first and second subjects may persist, but there is a closer kinship between them ; the bridge-passages disappear and are replaced by " episodes," which are directly derived from the

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main material and sustain the interest of the listener by their continued novelty and unexpectedness. The symphonies of Beethoven are more continuous in thought than the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart, with certain possible exceptions. There is little or no padding or mere filling-in between the occurrence of one idea and the next, because the whole is the sustained development of a single thought. The gain was not, perhaps, all on the side of Beethoven; but we are not here concerned with that.

It was upon the foundations laid by Beethoven that Wagner erected his colossal "music-drama." Like Vecchi and Gluck before him, though at very much greater length, Wagner expounded the principles of opera, and expounded them in very much the same terms. Wagner thought that he was going to resurrect the classical drama of Greece, just as the Florentines did

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before him, and his aim was just about as wide of this mark. He scored a bull on another target. For he possessed a far greater musical genius than Gluck, and was saved only thereby from becoming an arid theorist. Gluck himself was rather more inconsistent than Wagner in carrying into practice the ideas expressed in his writings. Wagner would never have made the mistake of setting a text that was alien to his musical style, as Gluck did in *Armide*¹, and thereby making it appear more ridiculous than it already was.

As everyone knows, Wagner wrote his own librettos, which were constructed according to operatic theories

¹ The libretto of *Armide* was written by Quinault for Lully a hundred years before. Gluck's music does transform a frigid, classical French drama into something like a romantic German opera, but the incongruity remains and, strictly judged, the passionate music of *Armide* is absurdly at variance with the words she sings.

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olved at great length out of his own head. But not everyone has perceived how his strong musical instinct shaped those librettos, quite unconsciously, I believe, so that they became ideal scaffoldings for the symphonic style, which he evolved from that of Beethoven. In *The Ring* it was partly by accident that the design took its peculiar shape—the accident that the last part of the poem was written first, so that we get those frequent recapitulations of the whole story, which are dramatically so redundant, but musically so invaluable. If Wagner did not perceive their value, he certainly made good use of them, and in *Tristan* he repeated the method in a highly condensed form. In the first act, for example, the carefully placed repetitions of the sailor's song, of Isolde's message to Tristan and Tristan's reply, of the passage about the casket of drugs and of several other details

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make the act ideal for musical setting, given the Wagnerian system of thematic development, while Tristan's delirium in the third act gives the composer the opportunity for a marvellous recapitulation of all that has gone before.

In *Die Meistersinger* the process is rather different, since the work pivots, musically, round the *Preislied*. But the principle of repetition is the same, although the foreknowledge, which most of us now have of Walther's song in its final form, somewhat blunts our interest in its slow, but wonderful, evolution from scattered fragments in the score. If, therefore, Wagner was in some respects a bad theorist, he was in practice the greatest of all operatic librettists, since he produced texts which were ideally suited to his musical style—an ironic fact in view of his thesis that the drama was the all-important thing and music merely its

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handmaid. Yet how often, even to-day we hear the old criticism of the "tiresome" repetitions in *The Ring*, which are, in fact, the very bones of its musical anatomy.

It must not be supposed that Wagner's operas would have assumed their particular form, if, supposing that the German symphonic method of composition existed, the drama of the middle nineteenth century had not been romantic in its philosophy and heroic in its subjects. The mere fact that improved lighting and mechanical inventions made it possible to do things on the stage which had formerly been impracticable, encouraged the dramatist to introduce all manner of natural and supernatural phenomena upon the scene. Opera had concerned itself often before with storms and witches, earthquakes and ghosts and furies, especially in the seventeenth century, when audiences were prepared to accept a

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very conventional presentation of these things and persons upon the stage. It was very natural that opera should be so concerned, since music could obviously enhance to an enormous extent their dramatic effect. Indeed, without music their effect would be in most cases negligible. The age of reason was somewhat scornful of the supernatural and sniffed at the inadequate presentation of the natural. So they dropped out of opera for a while.

When the romantic movement cast a glamour upon natural scenery and revived the interest in dragons, monsters, devils and other fearful wild fowl, and the mechanics enabled producers to present them in the theatre in a more realistic manner — however ridiculous that manner might appear to us—this element inevitably resumed its place in opera. The beginning of the revival may be seen in Mozart's *The*

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Magic Flute. It was continued in the operas of Weber and Marschner and brought to its logical conclusion in *The Ring* with all its apparatus of mermaids, giants, reptiles, volcanoes, flocks of birds, flying horses, magic swords, potions and helmets, and so on. The trouble is that nowadays, we are far more willing to accept the conventional descent of a god in his machine, as presented in the recent Cambridge performance of Purcell's *King Arthur*, than the vain attempts to stage the cataclysm in *Götterdämmerung*. The thing cannot be done realistically—at least we have yet to see Brunnhilde mount Grane and ride into a blazing furnace in the centre of the stage; and no one has yet succeeded in inventing a good convention for it. So we can only hope for a vocally fine Brunnhilde, a first-rate orchestra and conductor—and close our eyes.

The Ring is the extreme example of

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heroic spectacular drama in the romantic vein. At about the same time, Verdi was writing for the opening of the Cairo opera house, a pendant to the engineering achievement at Suez, his grand opera *Aïda*. Here spectacle of a rather different kind, more garish and less serious, has a large part in the scheme. It is the precursor of a long line of fancy-dress displays, diverging on one side to musical plays like *Chu Chin Chow* on the other to such works as Puccini's *Turandot*. Verdi himself did not write a second work in this style. He turned to Shakespeare and produced in collaboration with Boito the two great masterpieces of his old age, *Otello* and *Falstaff*. It is not unreasonable to see in these works the same influence, which produced in England the spectacular and consequently much curtailed Shakespearian revivals of Sir Henry Irving at the Lyceum, and later of Sir Herbert Tree at His Majesty's

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Theatre. This is the more intellectual side—for all that we who have known Granville Barker and William Poel and Gordon Craig may turn up our noses—of the theatrical period, which produced *Aïda* and its kind. And if we set Verdi's last works beside Irving's productions, may we not put the operas of Strauss and von Hofmannsthal beside those of Sir Herbert Tree,¹ who, at any rate, found himself sufficiently in the same key to produce one of them at his theatre?

In the meantime, the melodramatic plays of Victorien Sardou had become fashionable in the commercial theatres. Immediately there is a repercussion in the world of opera evidenced by the works of Puccini and of infinitely less talented men, like Giordano. Polite

¹ You may, if you wish, substitute the name of Rheinhardt for that of Tree, if you think that by using a foreign name you will enhance the position of Strauss.

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melodrama of high life has its counterpart in violent melodrama of low life, and the immortal twins, now popularly abbreviated to *Cav. and Pag.*, are born. Even the reaction against this style in the drama of Ibsen and his followers has not been without its effect upon opera. Charpentier's *Louise* shall be my witness, which is an attempt to set to music a Galsworthian social drama. That it should be a failure is not only due to the composer's very limited inspiration; the thing could not be done and only a composer of limited inspiration would have attempted it. Another Frenchman with real genius bent the logic of his race to carrying out literally the Wagnerian theories in a setting of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and thereby proved conclusively their unsoundness. He wrote music that was the exact bloodless counterpart of Maeterlinck's thin drama but it fails to be interesting as music,

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beautiful though it is as sound from one moment to the next.

When we consider the drama of the present day, we come upon one answer to the question which is so often asked : Why is there no composer writing good opera ? Whether you look at the popular successes, at the conversational drama of Noel Coward, at the witty farces of Sacha Guitry, at the metaphysical somersaults of Pirandello, or go to the other extreme and examine the strange products of the " art " theatres, you will find nothing that gives the composer an opening for music. There is, perhaps, more hope in the " expressionist " drama than in the commercial drama, because its symbolical manner might conceivably lend itself to music, and, indeed, has been made to do so. But the manner is at once so unintelligible and so childish that it has little chance of capturing the attention of anyone, who is not

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mesmerized by its novelty and its fashionableness in a small clique. Opera must, after all, rely upon material which the average man will understand and enjoy. It is no good turning up one's nose at the commercial theatre because it is commercial, or turning it down again at a piece of undramatic nonsense, simply because it is performed in an upper room before a subscribing audience.

So a composer of great talent like Vaughan Williams has to fall back on a conventional ballad-opera story, as in *Hugh the Drover*, or a Shakespearean play, as in his new Falstaff opera, or avoid the form altogether. There is no characteristically contemporary popular opera, and I see no hope of there being any until a change in the style of the drama brings the theatre once more into touch with music.

Another answer to the question about

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the dearth of opera is complementary to the first. We have seen how Wagner turned the symphonic methods of Beethoven to his own purpose and created a style which was admirably suited to the type of poetic drama fashionable in his day. His method led quite naturally to the rationalization of opera, and the form became in the works of Puccini, Leoncavallo and Charpentier more and more realistic, and less and less artificial, just as in the theatre dramatists advanced from the artificiality of Robertson's plays through Ibsen, Pinero and Shaw to the naturalistic comedy of to-day. But this comedy is, none the less, not without its artificiality. It approaches more and more towards the comedy of manners and may not unreasonably be called the modern equivalent of the plays of Congreve, Wycherley and Vanbrugh.

Now the operatic equivalent of the

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Restoration comedy was a very stiff and artificial affair. Yet those, who saw the revivals of Purcell's *King Arthur* and *The Fairy Queen* at Cambridge, will admit that the convention is not without its attractions and advantages. Indeed, the revival of interest in such works and in the Italian operas of Handel seems to indicate a tendency towards the replacement of the realistic convention by a more artificial convention—a tendency, which has long been apparent in the more advanced school of theatrical production.

Music has, however, departed so very far from the style, which could accommodate itself to a stiff and formal drama. It has become so fluid that it is not easily to be shaped into a well-defined form. The very freedom from harmonic restraint, which it has gained, makes for an empty facility that is quite as worthless as the most hackneyed filling-in of the set forms of

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a hundred and fifty years ago. Composers have revolted against the tyranny of the German symphonic form, and, whether we like it individually or not, Beethoven is ceding more and more of his popularity to Haydn and Mozart and to Bach and Handel, though this does not, of course, detract from the high esteem in which his best works are held by all intelligent musicians. But modern composers have yet to find a new convention, whether based upon eighteenth century methods or not, which will once more give a definite direction to music. At present they are wandering this way and that in the wilderness of experiment. That something will come of these explorations cannot be doubted, unless we are to despair of musical genius, but what that something will be, I am not hardy enough to prophesy. It does seem, however, that in opera the way lies towards a more artificial style and

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towards the exaltation of the voice at the expense of the orchestra, in fact towards a reversal of the German symphonic ideal.

IV

WE have reviewed, very briefly, the influences upon operatic form of nationality and of contemporary movements in drama and the other arts—influences which are respectively vertical and horizontal from the standpoint of chronology. It now remains to discuss the common denomination of the various styles of opera, and to see if we can arrive at some criterion.

In the first place, we must accept the premiss that opera is a definite and independent form governed by laws which do not necessarily apply either to music or drama. Without the premiss we can get nowhere. There are, indeed, enthusiasts who derive all their enjoyment of opera solely from the music. They ignore the dramatic action and the

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spectacle, and are content to sit with their eyes closed or even out of sight of the stage altogether. They allow their minds to be absorbed entirely in the music. It may be admitted that the average production at Covent Garden, in which singers from half-a-dozen different foreign opera-houses act in different styles and even sing in different languages before antiquated scenery, that was in some instances originally painted for a different opera, gives some encouragement to the adoption of this attitude. Nor can I deny that a great deal of pleasure may be derived from merely listening to many operatic masterpieces. But this is only to say that the music of a great opera must have some intrinsic interest, whether it take the form of a continuous succession of good melodies (as in Handel and Verdi) or of an elaborate web of musical ideas (as in the *finales* of Mozart and in the Wagnerian operas).

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While, however, great pleasure may be derived from these things, the main point of the music—the reason why it takes a particular form and develops in a particular direction—will be lost, if its dramatic purport is ignored. It is obvious that our pleasure is greater, if in listening, say, to the famous quartet in *Rigoletto*, we follow not only the delightful complexity of the score (taking voices and orchestra as one), but also the cross-currents of the dramatic situation and the interplay of character which are depicted in the music. When it comes to an incident such as that which occurs in the first act of *Der Rosenkavalier*, when Ochs interrupts the tenor with a thump on the table and a shout of “*Als Morgengabe!*” the brilliant musical point made by Strauss is simply unintelligible unless we appreciate also the dramatic point made by von Hofmannsthal.

Now the quartet in *Rigoletto* is good

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music, but hardly good drama, since the action is held up just when, according to the canons, it should move swiftly. The incident in *Der Rosenkavalier* is, contrariwise, excellent comedy, but hardly musical at all, since it passes so swiftly that music has no time to deploy its forces.¹ But both are good opera. In each case the music and the drama play into one another's hands, and by a generous policy of give-and-take (drama yielding in the one, music in the other) co-operate to give the maximum of effect to the scenes.

Let us take these scenes as types of two different, but equally good, elements in opera. The quartet represents all those moments, when the dramatic

¹ I speak, of course, only of Ochs's angry exclamation; for Strauss has led up to the point with an abundance of musical resource. Having prepared the way, he steps aside for his dramatist to take the stage.

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action stands still while the composer sums up in his music the emotional content of the scene. The principle is the same as that which actuated Shakespeare, when he put into the mouth of his character a beautiful poetic speech, which at once relieves the tension and reveals the inmost significance of the drama. Only in the poetic drama do we find anything comparable with this reflective and resuming power of music in opera. This power is shown in many various ways. The first and simplest form is in the *aria* ; and, if you, who have always thought it ridiculous that the operatic hero or heroine should waste time in singing about the position of affairs instead of getting on with the business of rescue or escape, would only accept this convention as you are presumably prepared to accept the convention of Macbeth's soliloquies, your understanding of opera as an art-form would be enlarged.

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From the air it is only a step to the duet and the other *ensembles*, in which also the emotions of the characters are held suspended in a musical movement.¹ It may be very unnatural for Pamina and Papageno to indulge in a Platonic discussion of the state of matrimony, when they ought to be packing her traps and quitting the palace. It may be still more unnatural for two pairs of singers, conveniently possessed of contralto and tenor, soprano and baritone voices, to stand on either side of a wall and sing in perfect harmony at the tops of their very loud voices, though each couple is supposed to be inaudible to the other. But, if we are to abolish

¹ This does not apply to the Mozartian *finale*, wherein the action, so far from being suspended, is carried forward with an ever-increasing hurry and excitement. In these movements, of which the *finale* of Act I in *Don Giovanni* is the finest example, music and drama join hands in perfect comity, each enhancing the effect of the other.

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things like "*Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen*" from *The Magic Flute* and the quartet from *Rigoletto*, we may as well give up the idea of opera at all, since that would be to take away all possibility of musical development and would reduce opera to a dreary recitative, even if so much use of music could be justified. It may be admitted that the convention becomes ridiculous when characters leave the stage in very slow haste to hundredfold repetitions of "*Andiamo.*" Is it unfair to plead that this is only the abuse of a convention, which is not necessarily bad in itself? Because feeble dramatists have reduced the soliloquy and the "aside" to absurdity, that is no justification for condemning as inadmissible these very useful instruments in the dramatist's equipment.

It may be said that Wagner managed to do without these reflective *ensembles*. That, however, is not altogether true, for all he did was to banish the voices

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from them. With his wonderful orchestral resource he summed up his situations in long symphonic movements. These are in most instances, though not always, put to further use, covering the time necessary for a change of scene. Moreover, they usually carry the dramatic action forward as well as resuming the emotions of the scene which is just over. But in principle the Rhine-journey and the Funeral March in *Götterdämmerung* are in the same class as the *ensembles* of Mozart and Verdi. The long duet in *Tristan* is another example of Wagner's adaptation of the convention, in which the voices are retained, although they are rarely heard in concert.

This duet is, by the way, another proof of Wagner's perfect understanding of what is wanted of an operatic librettist. With all respect to those learned commentators who have attempted to expound the philosophy

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of Tristan and Isolde, the words of this duet consist of something very like nonsense, and I think we should be foolish to seek any meaning in them alone. The music expounds their meaning as clearly as can be, but it is not a meaning that can be put coherently into words. The text is, in fact, a mere peg on which to hang the most passionate expression of mutual love in the whole of music. Verbal clearness is here of no account, and it would be quite impossible to achieve the same effect with words alone. Equally the effect could not be produced without the words, scenery and stage-action, which are its context. In short it is an effect only obtainable in opera, and in no other way.

The air, the *ensemble*, and the purely orchestral commentary are, then, instances of the drama yielding to music. But there are no less important moments, when the process must be

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reversed. For the action cannot remain static, which is what usually happens whenever music is allowed to have its way. Here is the central problem of opera, and it has been solved in various ways. The first is the Italian method, by which, as we have already seen, the opera was frankly divided into recitatives, in which the action was carried on, and airs, in which the emotional situation is reviewed, while the drama stands still. The introduction of *ensembles* led to the development of a new device, the *finale*, in which several characters took part and the whole act was brought to an exciting climax. It was Mozart who brought the technique of the *finale* to perfection. He used voices and orchestra with a consummate artistry to express the entanglement or resolution of a complex intrigue. This was the beginning of the German method of handling opera. It is only

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a step from the dramatic *finale* of Mozart to the continuous "music-drama" of Wagner, though the development of a very different musical idiom was necessary in order to make it feasible.

We have noted that in the early German operas, spoken dialogue was used instead of recitative. This is the second main solution of the problem, and it is a solution, which has found favour in England. This kind of opera is a play with more or less elaborate songs interspersed between the dramatic scenes. To this class belong Purcell's operas¹ (except *Dido and Aeneas*), *The Beggar's Opera* and its numerous progeny, *The Bohemian Girl*, the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, and modern works

¹ It might be more accurate to call these works dramas with incidental music, though the music plays a very important part in their scheme and is, indeed, the sole justification for their revival nowadays.

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like *Hugh, the Drover* and *The Boatswain's Mate*. In fact, in so far as we can be said to possess a national style of opera at all, it is of this kind, in which music is frankly relegated to those parts of the drama where it is considered suitable, and left out of account altogether when the action can get along without it.

On the face of it this seems to be a sensible way out of the difficulty. But it has one serious disadvantage, which prejudices the method in anything but light comedy. The change from speech to song is too violent, and defeats its own end, if it is designed to produce a more natural effect. It also destroys the possibility of giving to an opera the feeling of unity, which it should possess, no less than a symphony. The Italian method does at least allow for the maintenance throughout the opera of musical tone, so that the adherence to one main tonality, varied with excur-

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sions into contrasting keys, can make its musical and dramatic effect—an effect which plays a very large part in the operas of Mozart and Verdi. The introduction of spoken dialogue between the musical movements makes it impossible for anyone, who is not gifted with a very acute and rare sensibility, to perceive any such effect in the ballad-opera form, and continuity of musical thought is out of the question. It was no doubt in their desire to escape from this handicap that the two modern composers, whose works are mentioned in the list above, did not adhere very strictly to the ballad-opera convention, but allowed their operas to become more and more elaborate and symphonic as they proceed. The result is that we are conscious in these delightful pieces not only of the incongruity of the changes between speech and music, but also of a confusion of styles.

While, therefore, I would not deny

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that the ballad-opera may make a very successful and amusing entertainment, it does appear that it can never produce that sense of completeness which marks a true work of art. It is as though in a picture the main features were painted in oils and elaborately finished, while the intervening passages are sketched in with charcoal. The result may be interesting and, to some extent, beautiful, but it does not give us the satisfaction of a final fulfilment of the design.

It remains, therefore, for music to compromise with drama, to take the uttermost farthing in those poetical and reflective passages where its exaction will not impede the movement of the whole, but to give way gracefully where the action must be swift, to the extent of appearing intrinsically uninteresting or even taken by itself, ugly. There is one great and outstanding example of this abnegation by music of its own charms

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in that long narration by Wotan in the second act of *Die Walküre*, which hasty judgment has so often damned for dreary. Consideration (for which it allows, indeed, plenty of time) would reveal to the intelligent hearer, not only that Wotan's secret could not be more effectively revealed to Brunnhilde in any other way, but that after the excitements and richness of all that has gone before, a point of repose is very welcome before we proceed to even more violent happenings. A dish of rice pudding is appetising after a surfeit of plum pudding and mince pies.

This, however, is an extreme instance, and Wotan's monologue can also be defended as a perfect expression of the god's tenderness and impotent despair. More often music has to make its contribution with swiftness and point. Here comes in our example from *Der Rosenkavalier*—Ochs's interruption of the bleating tenor at the Marschallin's

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levée. This is an instance which I took quite at random—the first that came into my head. But it shows well enough how music can, without putting any brake on movement, give added point to a dramatic effect.

The operatic composer possesses a weapon of extraordinary subtlety and power, since once music, by itself without concrete meaning, is associated with words or actions, it magnifies their emotional power and gives the finest shades to their meaning. That is why many songs by Schubert and Brahms, whose words are little better than the doggerel on a Christmas card, are none the less great and immortal masterpieces. That is why incredibly silly and ill-written librettos are often redeemed by the music to which they are set. The music provides the poetic quality which is lacking in the words; but conversely no amount of imagination in the poem can save poor

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music. That is why, in sum, music must be regarded as the more important element in opera.

Although, however, music may redeem a poor libretto, it is obvious that the better the libretto, the better the opera is likely to be. The names of da Ponte, of Wagner as poet, of Boito, of von Hofmannsthal, are associated with the finest examples of operatic art, in which there is something like perfection in the balance of the two elements. In works like *The Magic Flute*, *Fidelio*, *Faust* and *Boris Godounov* we are made only too well aware of the disparity between the composer and his librettist. In the first two of these works the musician lifts us by a mighty effort of his genius into a rarified atmosphere of ideal thought and feeling, which not one man in a million would perceive in the pantomime of Schickaneder or the political melodrama of Bouilly. Gounod's librettists debased

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a great poetic theme and the composer certainly did not perform the miracle of elevating it to its original plane, but *Faust* remains a deservedly popular work; while Moussorgsky's shapeless version of Pushkin's "dramatic chronicle" is impossible to present entirely in its original form (whatever we may think of Rimsky-Korsakov's drastic revision) and is only saved by his powerful handling of individual scenes. As works of art, all these must be conceded to be less perfect than the operas written by Bizet and Puccini on far less noble themes, though this need not prevent us from preferring imperfect masterpieces to more complete achievements on a lower grade.

The first requirement of the librettist is a broad simplicity of outline; the composer must be responsible for filling in the details of psychology and for subtilizing the dramatic action. If you retort that *Figaro*, *Otello* and *Falstaff*

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are extremely complicated in their plots, I can only ask you to compare da Ponte with Beaumarchais, and Boito with Shakespeare. It will then be seen that the librettists have produced dramas which are clear and straightforward, with no unnecessary elaboration of incident. Mozart and Verdi restore in a different way the complexity and imaginative invention of the originals. This primary requirement of swiftness in the action and spareness of outline involves a great sacrifice of literary interest, and it must be confessed that there are few librettos, which can be read with enjoyment for their own sakes. Indeed, I know of only one, which really fulfils this condition—Franc-Nohain's witty *L'Heure Espagnole*, which Ravel has clothed with music of an equal brilliance.

Literary quality is, then, not of the first importance in a libretto. What is required is a sense of the theatre and a

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willingness to play into the hands of the composer. If, however, the libretto is not of much account without the music, neither can the music, as I have already pointed out, stand on its own feet. All the skill in characterization and in clinching a dramatic situation goes for nothing, if we do not know what they are about. Ochs's shout of "*Als Morgengabe!*" is nothing but a vehement, senseless, tiresome interruption of a pretty tune, unless we perceive its meaning and comic point. The tune sung by the Italian tenor is itself meaningless and feeble unless we refer it to its context and realize the satirical implication. When we see it performed on the stage, all this is so clear and so swiftly apprehended, provided we understand the language, that we give it no conscious thought, but just enjoy the fun. But it is, perhaps, necessary to warn those, whose German or Italian is not good, that it is well to make a

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thorough acquaintance with the story of an opera, if not with the libretto, before seeing it for the first time. No complex work of art can be immediately apprehended, especially if one factor in it remains to the end an unknown quantity. After all, if opera is worth the effort of attention, it is surely worth the little extra effort of complete comprehension. This is only to say that opera shares with all the other arts the necessity of a use of their intelligence and an acquisition of some general knowledge on the part of those who experience it. No one who is completely insensitive to words and ignorant of literary movements and conventions, can appreciate great poetry, nor will the complete ignoramus get much pleasure or any benefit from a visit to the National Gallery. Yet nine out of ten people who go to the opera, have probably never given a moment's thought to the form in

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general or the work in particular. It is no wonder that some of them find it a dull and unprofitable way of spending an evening.

* * *

Opera is so diverse in its incarnations, so paradoxical in its successful flouting of what appear at one time or another to be the stern laws that govern it, that it is difficult to discover any formula which will fit methods so diverse as those of Handel and Wagner, Mozart and Puccini. Perhaps no formula can exist other than the broad one which I have suggested. All else depends upon the individual artist and upon the times and country in which he happens to be born. But even if something essential has escaped me and I have been able to lay before the reader no more than some workshop details of operatic practice as carried out by the great masters, I am in good company

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in my failure. For the æsthetic of opera is a whimsy thing, and has eluded the grasp of those theorists who have bent their minds to its capture, as evasively as the shape which Orpheus vainly turned to embrace.

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